

NOVEMBER 27, 1980

The opening of deer season was a dull event in our part of the Shortgrass Country. Our hunters decided that the drouth had killed too many deer for them to lease the pastures. Even the poachers and highway hunters seem to have moved to better ranges and fatter game.

Losing the income was plenty disappointing. Lease hunting isn't a big deal out here, but compared to dry weather ranching, mounting hummingbird wings on penny postcards is a good business.

We never were in the top dollar range on game. Every party that ever leased from us had a trained negotiator who could make me feel so bad about his crippled grandfather's last year in the field, or his blind stepson's only chance to get out of town, that the gross receipt barely covered the telephone expense to listen to these sad tales.

One season I tried trading the deer hunting for some cottonseed to use as feed. I'd watched our neighbors stockpile seed every year. I had visions of wintering our old ewes on big stomachs full of that fine protein. However, after I'd showed a couple of parties of cotton farmers around, I found out that it would have been easier to trade our hunting rights for a pipeline easement through one of those Middle Eastern countries.

The trouble in trading with anybody connected to agriculture is that we all understand each other. City folks don't know that the biggest cotton farmer in Texas and largest cowman alive may not have six-bits worth of liquid capital between them at various times of the year.

Underneath our hides we are blood brothers. I suppose it'd be more precise to say that "underneath our skulls we are blood brothers." Farmers go as crazy over stocker calves and light lambs as herders do mother cows and ewes. In my opinion about 50 percent of the disasters to hit tractor jockeys in our country are caused from getting too close to an auction ring.

I'm having a hard time finding some new hunters. In the summer, an hombre came through San Angelo buying old sheep horns and deer antlers. One of the guys here at the ranch cleaned us out of my best sales talk. I'd gathered horns to throw close to the roads from as far away as New Mexico. Porcupines and mutt hounds were bad enough about chewing up my game trail without a cowboy coming along and sacking them up to sell in town.

Christmas is too close to completely miss out on the hunter's coin. I figure that if we'll stay away from the cottonseed angle and concentrate on the metroplexes, we might salvage the deal. I've got a man out this morning putting horn rubs on the hackberry trees with a horseshoe rasp. Surely by the weekend there'll be a redcap fall for our line.